

Constructing the Mean

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"Buildings classify themselves as witnesses fixing the way of life and the moral condition of humanity, age by age."

Auguste Choisy, 1899¹

Daedalus, the mythical first architect, handed down an idea of engagement clearly framed in his 'fly neither too high, nor too low' caution to Icarus, and it goes by many names developed across different periods and cultures: the Golden Mean, the Middle Way, and the Doctrine of the Mean. The Mean is simultaneously informed by the *live* situation of shifting conditions, and a core intention in the form of engagement. The unique insight of Daedalus is in this idea of order; there is a dynamic balance situated between what one expects it to be, and what it is. In the text that follows, this space is characterized by *becoming* and *forming*. To locate this course, to form and be informed, is to participate and to construct this idea of order.

This paper explores the idea of the Mean as it relates to context, and constructs the idea of a *contextual mean* through a number of examples. The first section deals with the relationship between the maker and the thing that is made. In terms of a Mean, the relationship of thinking and making is explored both in how this can positively inform creative work, that is, the intellectual dimension and exploration of work, but also the way in which thinking (over-thinking) can become something of an obstacle in the making.

The second section deals with some of the ways that context may inform and form a work. Focusing on Chichén Itzá, the place is presented as a point of reference and a form of the contextual mean within the wide range of what *defines* it, specifically as it passes through and survives a range of contexts. In both sections, variations of the relationship between a work and one who experiences it proposes that an "open work," and perhaps more specifically, inclusive work, creates the conditions for what may be otherwise framed as spiritual in nature.

space between maker and artifact

"Truth in art is the unity of a thing with itself: the outward rendered expressive of the inward; the soul made incarnate; the body instinct with spirit."

Oscar Wilde, 1897²

Exploring the space between maker and artifact this section begins with a quote from an artist, in this case the oft quoted Oscar Wilde. The artist is cited primarily because this space between is best understood from *within* the experience of making, whether from the point of view of the artist or the "reader." Regardless of medium or position, the one who makes constructs this space in the form of context, a context produced in the dialogue between maker and the thing made.

Making may be considered as a form of dialogue that produces this context of the space between. Turning to its Greek roots, *dialogos*, *logos* meaning "the word," or "meaning of the word" and *dia* meaning "through" (not "two"), David Bohm outlines a more precise understanding of the word *dialogue*, one that suggests "a *stream of meaning* flowing among and through us and between us."³ He goes on to add,

"This will make possible a flow of meaning in the whole group, out of which may emerge some new understanding. It's something new, which may not have been the starting point at all. It's something creative. And this shared meaning is the 'glue' or 'cement' that holds people and societies together."⁴

In its essence, this is a direct demonstration of the contextual mean; in the balance of all things considered, by individual or collective, an ever more complete understanding arises, even if this understanding is ephemeral, overturned by discoveries or new information.

Consider *The Thinker*, by Auguste Rodin, and the space between Rodin and *The Thinker*, the artist in dialogue with the work. Zooming out, this space between the two is encapsulated by the contemporaneous context of art in France at the turn of the century, and this within the history of art and sculpture going forward and backward in time. The contextual mean describes not only the relationship of the artist to the work, but the artist to the enduring practice which remains as a dynamic order.

At the scale of artist and artifact, other questions arise, especially if we consider that *The Thinker* may be a representation of Rodin himself.⁵ The artist turns his gaze upon himself, on the one who makes, and the one who thinks, the artist in dialogue with himself. Regarding *The Thinker* Rodin said, “The fertile thought slowly elaborates itself within his brain. He is no longer dreamer, he is creator.”⁶ This sounds very much like a familiar, even mythical, creative process. The artist starts out with a plan, but through the process of making, is himself transformed. To create the work is to construct the idea, and *have* the idea in the making. Rather than simply equate thinking with being (as Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum*, “I think therefore I am”) the artist is more circumspect. The thought is held by the “dreamer,” but made actionable by the “creator.”

Standing in front of the sculpture, one returns to an experience that precedes its description. There is a great tension in the relationship one establishes with the work. The Thinker leans forward, almost at the edge of a seat, tipping forward, as if falling onto the viewer standing below who has moved in closely, and is trying to get a good look, studying the propped head and furrowed brow. The head, heavy and balanced on the forearm, a tilting column thickening at the knee. The massive base strains pulling all lines taut in the stretched skin of the back, the body arcs forward.

What is the thinker thinking about? Is the Thinker merely a symbol of thinking? When we ask these questions, we are drawn into the question, no longer witnesses, but participants, contemplating the work and constructing the work. The work is inclusive, becoming and forming, remaining alive through the multiplicity of its forms of engagement.

the multiplicity of context

Although known and described in a different way than Rodin’s *The Thinker*, the buildings and spaces of Chichén Itzá form no less significant point of reference in a contextual mean. Artifactually standing as witness to centuries of physical change and a multitude of interpretations, the physical indices are braced against fluid contexts. As a physical, “open” artifact, and enduring idea, its form is capable of holding countless experiences and meanings. Chichén Itzá remains, like *The Thinker*, evidence and index of the Mean. To state this is not an attempt to totalize the work or assign a static value, instead, it is to recognize architecture’s ability to absorb difference and change, and remain.

The place and its artifacts, *arriving out of a multiplicity*, has an affinity for phenomena like Spring, or the migration of populations; specific forces may be located, measured, and described, but the ability to comprehend its entirety remains elusive. It may be complete in every moment, but never totalized. Even in the artifactual realm, the realm of what is made, things like symbols arise out of multiplicities in order to make sense of multiplicities. Symbols, that they are created, form a series of indices marking the trajectory of culture at large. These nodal points are reminders of where we have been and point to where we are going, if such multiple futures can be considered. But symbols flatten context, oversimplifying the multiplicity for which they stand. Once codified, they are often confused for, and therefore stand to replace, that which they represent.

Perhaps a more gentle and nuanced form of this ‘connection’ and desire to make sense of the multiplicity, while still allowing it to remain an “open work,” is the metonym. A metonymy is traditionally defined in its “extended use” as “a thing used or regarded as a substitute for or symbol of something else. Also (esp. in Linguistics and Literary Theory): the process of semantic association involved in producing and understanding a metonymy.”⁷ By way of note, the definition continues, “Because the association involved in metonymy is typically by contiguity rather than similarity, metonymy is often contrasted with metaphor.”⁸

The metonym, with emphasis on contiguity, bridges the potential of meaning and the inevitable layering, or “appreciation” of meaning, with the experience of the simultaneity of material and its ever implicit

couple, space. In a place where a horizon line punctuated by mountains, one *knows where one is* relative to them. It is the first order on the ground. For the architect, the idea of order manifest in the work, whatever it be, establishes a connection physically and to a physical condition. The mountain tells me where I am, and the “mountains” constructed the same. They both come to *represent* where ‘I am’ and *are* where I am.

There is much that can be experienced at Chichén Itzá in this way. In the same way that the mountains come to have a significant value in the cosmology of the Mayan and are constructed as a way of *having* the idea of them, in the geographical place characterized by an arid landscape of largely underground rivers and marked by cenotes (large sinkholes and significant source of water), water attains a significant value. Water, and especially in this context, could, in a metonymic reading, be understood to both symbolize life and in fact be life, insofar as there is no life without it. The name of the place, Chichén Itzá, establishes an enduring reference to the landscape, *chichén*, meaning “the mouth of the well,” of the Itzá people.

The “mouth of the well” is elevated to a sacred site, perhaps in part due to this metonymic quality. The metonym is difficult to simply exchange for “another meaning.” The tendency toward dichotomies or dualities are bound together and are transcended in the metonym; the cenotes have the capacity to function as mirror and threshold, not only *representing* a threshold condition, but *actualizing* one.

Kay Read introduces a metonymic idea in the suggestion that spirit equals matter.⁹ Elaborating on this contiguity in the context of Mesoamerica, she cites John Dewey,

“As Dewey suggested, no strict division exists between the material and the spiritual, between bodies and their animating powers. In Mesoamerica, however, this takes on a sense of vital life that moves well beyond Dewey's imaginings. There, beauty is neither an invisible spiritual matter nor simply the exhilarating and creative experience of growth; rather, it is embodied visibly in a huge variety of changing material spirits that make bloody existence itself possible.”¹⁰

It is astonishing to stand and touch a stone or brick placed over one thousand years ago, and furthermore, to know that one is standing in the same place as the person who placed it. Beside some character building weathering, it is the only thing that remains; everything else is a condition. The trees, none of them specifically were there, but remain as a condition. The sky and water, no doubt, also a condition. But the architecture, this astonishing witness to time, and no witness at all, is kept intact, forgotten, rediscovered, overbuilt, built-over. It is kept alive in the experience *of* it, and *with* it. This contact cascades into memory, into stories, into language, into myths, and is recounted and transformed.

conclusion: the artifactual present

If meaning is not its enduring quality, we are free to contemplate the work in its artifactual present animated by our engagement. In that present it becomes not an object of analysis, but an experience of wonder. As reference, it is a point of access into the underlying structure of both the temporal and the history of architecture, allowing for both discovery and contemplation, meaning and meaning constructed. Conceptually, there is space between preconception and insight; here it is framed as the contextual mean. It can be understood as a place of transformation where preconception and insight come back together, where they are reconciled.

Lindsay Jones writes, “Regarding the ontological payoff for hermeneutical interpretation, Sullivan suggests that, ‘One’s own self-understanding suffers change in the process of understanding...In order to offer an authentic interpretation of another cultural condition, one must be sensitive to changes in one’s own being, which transformations are necessary to understand another world of meaning. This is why historians of religion insist on the value of hermeneutics, the knowledge that comes from the act of interpreting.”¹¹

Whether it be the equating of thinking with being, as questioned by Rodin, or the search for the “real message” in the interpretation of architecture and its context cautioned by Jones and others, a lack of

dialogue, open and inclusive, with a work predicts a limited preconception and limited understanding. In the relationship between individual, artifact and condition, it is the one who contemplates and engages the work that activates the work, and makes it possible to be understood through the various frames of meaning, experience, and transformation. Dialogue requires listening, being open to what one doesn't expect. This is the space of the contextual mean.

notes

1. Auguste Choisy, *Histoire de l'Architecture*, (2 vols., Paris 1899) vol.1, p.14. Quoted in Philip Steadman, *The Evolution of Designs: Biological Analogy in Architecture and the Applied Arts* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1979), 65.
2. Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. ed. Russell Jackson and Ian Small. 2005. Oxford: Oxford University Press, vol. 2: 170.
3. David Bohm and Lee Nichol, *On Dialogue* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 6-7.
4. Ibid., 7.
5. Albert Alhadeff, "Rodin: A Self-portrait in the Gates of Hell," *The Art Bulletin* 48 (3/4)(1966): 394.
6. Albert Edward Elsen, *Rodin*. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1963), 53.
7. Oxford English Dictionary. Third edition, December 2001; online version December 2011. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/117628>; accessed 08 March 2012.
8. Ibid.
9. Read, "Sun and Earth Rulers: What the Eyes Cannot See in Mesoamerica," 384.
10. Dewey, John. 1934/1980. *Art as Experience*. New York: Putnam's: Quoted in Read, "Sun and Earth Rulers: What the Eyes Cannot See in Mesoamerica," 384. (in the notes, Read adds: I would suggest that the Mesoamerican situation moves beyond Dewey on this matter in that spirit equals matter. It is not just that powers are embodied by matter but that they are matter (Binding Reeds, chap. 2).
11. Lawrence E. Sullivan, *Icanchu's Drum: An Orientation to Meaning in South American Religions*. (New York: Macmillan, 1988), 16. Quoted in Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison*. 251, note 56.